

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Tom Ridge
Secretary, Department of Homeland Security
425 I Street, NW
Washington, DC 20536

May 14, 2003

Dear Secretary Ridge:

We write to express our concern with the Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS). We urge you to extend the August 1, 2003 deadline until December 1, 2003 for universities to comply with this new system, and to utilize the interim tracking system until the severe technological glitches of SEVIS can be rectified.

The Inspector General of the Justice Department noted just last month, "that SEVIS is not yet fully implemented and that significant deficiencies remain in its implementation." Technological problems include: the frequent inaccessibility of the system and the help desk; the many hours it sometimes takes to complete a single student's record due to the system's slow performance and its changes to previously inputted data; the inability to delete inaccurate data; print-outs that are sometimes unintelligible; and print-outs that sometimes come out at another university's printer thousands of miles away from the university that tried to print. Once a student's data has been successfully inputted into SEVIS, there have been a number of cases where the State Department was unable to access the data and, on that basis, did not issue a student visa.

Despite diligent attempts by many educators to comply with this flawed system, it will be very difficult for many schools to meet the August deadline. As students often leave college in May and have to make plans for the fall, the real deadline for many schools is this month. Universities with large international student enrollments are particularly at risk given the unreliability of the "batch" transmission method and their practical inability to enter the data on each of their thousands of students by hand in time to meet the deadline.

According to §502(c) of the Enhanced Border Security and Visa Entry Reform Act of 2002, schools in material noncompliance with SEVIS will lose their approval to receive international students for at least one year. If the August deadline is not extended, universities may well have to refuse entry to large numbers of international students or risk losing their ability to accept them.

We understand the legitimate need for the new system, but until it actually works, a university should be able to use the paper system, supplemented by the interim tracking measures enacted by the Enhanced Border Security and Visa Entry Reform Act of 2002. This will not only provide necessary relief to the schools, but will also provide the

Department of Homeland Security with an opportunity to address the systemic technological problems at a time when the system is not being used so heavily. This is particularly important given the distinct possibility that the SEVIS system may crash.

We agree with your recent statement: "To universities and to those students, these aren't merely glitches or inconveniences. Taken together, we understand they threaten your ability to conduct research and obtain funding and attract the best students you possibly can, and they put your students and researchers at risk of severe delays, or even deportation."

We urge you to extend the August 1, 2003 deadline by granting a grace period to December 1, 2003. We hope and expect that by then, the technological glitches will be rectified, and SEVIS can go into effect at that time.

cc:

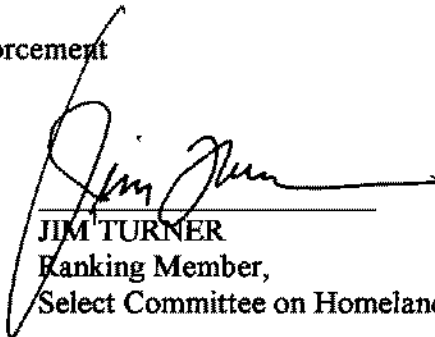
The Honorable Asa Hutchinson
Under Secretary, Border & Transportation Security

Janice Sposato
Acting Deputy Associate Director of Operations
Bureau of Citizenship and Immigration Services

Paul Ladd
Bureau of Immigration and Customs Enforcement



BARNEY FRANK
Ranking Member,
Financial Services Committee



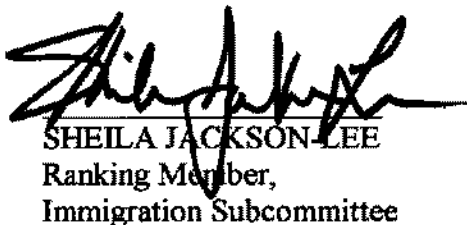
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